



# POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF MK GANDHI: EXPLORING EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Tamanna Singh

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates MK Gandhi's philosophical odyssey, delineating the convergence of his ideologies with a focus on equity and social justice. It scrutinizes the transformative trajectory of Gandhi's beliefs, charting their evolution from his formative years in South Africa to his leadership during India's struggle for independence. The analysis encompasses Gandhi's commitment to nonviolent resistance as a means to foster equity and social justice, examining the amalgamation of these principles in his advocacy for societal change. Additionally, this article explores the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's philosophical evolution, illuminating its influence on current discourses surrounding equity and social justice. It examines Gandhi's steadfast commitment to equity and social justice, tracing the development of his principles and their application in his strategies of nonviolent resistance. This paper scrutinizes the pivotal role of Gandhi's philosophical evolution in shaping movements for equality and social justice worldwide, elucidating the enduring relevance and impact of his teachings in contemporary societal frameworks. By dissecting Gandhi's philosophical journey, this article aims to provide insights into the enduring impact of his principles on fostering a more just and equitable society.

**KEYWORDS:** Gandhi, Equity, Social Justice, Trusteeship, Constructive Programme, Non-Violence

## INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's philosophical development was strongly influenced by his extensive exposure to other nations, religions, and experiences. Gandhi's convictions were formed as a mosaic of ethical, spiritual, and political principles, influenced by the teachings of Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Western philosophers such as Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Ruskin. Gandhi's ideology revolved around the fundamental principle of 'Ahimsa', which means non-violence. He felt that non-violence meant not only the absence of physical harm but an active principle of love and compassion towards all living beings. Gandhi viewed Ahimsa as extending beyond personal behaviour and encompassing social frameworks, highlighting the importance of fair systems that uplifted marginalised groups.

Gandhi's commitment to social justice was apparent in his struggle against discrimination, namely the caste system that was widespread in Indian society. He championed the dignity and equality of Dalits, confronting the traditional conventions that marginalised them. The objective of his Harijan movement was to elevate the untouchables, asking those in positions of privilege to acknowledge their shared humanity and adopt a mindset of inclusiveness. Gandhi's pursuit of social justice also motivated him to lead initiatives advocating for economic fairness. He promoted the concept of 'Sarvodaya,' which entails the well-being of all individuals, by calling for the equitable distribution of income and resources to narrow the disparity between the wealthy and the underprivileged. His promotion of spinning and weaving fabric, which represents independence and financial empowerment, highlighted the importance of escaping economic enslavement (Wolpert, 2001) [27]. Once

Gandhi said:

True economics is the economics of justice. People will be happy in so far as they learn to do justice and be righteous. All else is not only vain but leads straight to destruction. To teach the people to get rich by hook or by crook is to do them an immense injustice (Gandhi, 1958, p. 33) [10].

The non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements aimed to challenge British rule while simultaneously proclaiming the rights and dignity of the Indian people.

In addition, Gandhi's promotion of women's rights was ahead of its era. He advocated for gender equality, acknowledging women as equal collaborators in the pursuit of cultural change. His advocacy for women's education and involvement in public affairs defied the dominant patriarchal conventions. Despite facing criticism and scepticism Gandhi's philosophical ideals served as a beacon for various social justice movements worldwide. Notable individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Cesar Chavez found inspiration in his principles of non-violent resistance when fighting against racial segregation, apartheid, and exploitation.

Philosophizing MK Gandhi (1869-1948) is complex. Comprehending Gandhi's philosophy requires grappling with a multitude of interconnected ideas, considering historical contexts, and acknowledging the complexities inherent in his principles and their applications. Scholars, historians, and philosophers continue to engage in extensive analysis and interpretation of Gandhi's life and teachings, contributing to ongoing discussions about his significance and relevance in

the contemporary world. Nevertheless, Gandhi's legacy is not devoid of dispute. Some of his opinions and actions have faced criticisms, particularly about his approach to caste reforms and his stance on specific social concerns. These intricacies serve as a reminder that although Gandhi's philosophy continues to have an impact, it is crucial to thoroughly examine and modify his views to suit present-day circumstances. In the subsequent sections, the aforementioned statements have been thoroughly elaborated, substantiated by ample citations from scholarly sources by Gandhi and on Gandhi.

## METHODOLOGY

M. K. Gandhi's philosophical journey concerning the intersection of equity and social justice encompasses a multifaceted approach. Firstly, a historical analysis of Gandhi's writings, speeches, and actions is crucial to understand the evolution of his thoughts on equity and social justice throughout different stages of his life. Secondly, a contextual examination within the socio-political landscape of colonial India is essential to grasp how Gandhi's ideologies were shaped by the prevalent societal structures, including the caste system, economic disparities, and the struggle against British rule. Thirdly, an interdisciplinary approach drawing from philosophy, ethics, political science, and social movements can help delineate Gandhi's unique philosophical contributions to concepts of equity and social justice.

Moreover, employing comparative studies with other thinkers or movements advocating for social change can provide insightful contrasts and parallels, shedding light on the distinctiveness of Gandhi's ideas. Lastly, utilizing a critical lens to evaluate the strengths, limitations, and controversies surrounding Gandhi's approaches to equity and social justice would be integral to a comprehensive analysis. This methodological framework aims to offer a nuanced understanding of Gandhi's philosophical evolution and his contributions to the discourse on equity and social justice.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Satyagraha and Social Justice

Gandhi is best known for his philosophy of nonviolent resistance, termed 'Satyagraha.' This concept involved the use of nonviolent civil disobedience as a means of protesting and challenging oppressive systems. Understanding the nuances and applications of Satyagraha in various contexts requires a deep dive into Gandhi's writings and actions. Satyagraha was Gandhi's guiding principle in his quest for justice, equality, and freedom from oppression (Mohanty, 2021) [19]. Satyagraha was grounded in the belief that truth and nonviolence are inseparable. Gandhi believed that seeking truth and standing for justice should be accompanied by nonviolent means. He saw nonviolence as a powerful force that could transform oppressors while resisting injustice (Markovits, 2003, p. 146) [18].

Satyagraha was a method of resisting injustice without the use of violence. It involved passive resistance, civil disobedience, and noncooperation with unjust laws or systems. Gandhi encouraged individuals to challenge oppression through

peaceful means, refusing to comply with unjust authorities or laws, thereby exposing the inherent injustice in those systems (Prasad, 2018) [21]. Gandhi's first major Satyagraha in India was against the exploitation of farmers in Champaran, Bihar, who were forced to cultivate indigo by British planters. Gandhi organized protests, demanded justice for the farmers, and eventually succeeded in getting their grievances addressed (Gopinath, 2020) [13]. Another Satyagraha movement was Kheda Satyagraha (1918). This movement took place in Kheda district of Gujarat, where farmers were unable to pay taxes due to a widespread famine. Gandhi supported the farmers' struggle by initiating a nonviolent resistance campaign against the British authorities, advocating for tax relief and assistance for the farmers. Another significant Satyagraha movement was Non-cooperation Movement (1920-1922) led by Gandhi, it aimed to resist British rule through nonviolent non-cooperation (Bondurant, 1988) [7]. Indians boycotted British goods, educational institutions, and government services, causing disruption and highlighting India's ability to self-govern. Salt Satyagraha (1930) also known as the Dandi March; this was a protest against the British salt monopoly. Gandhi led a march to the coastal village of Dandi and symbolically broke the salt laws by collecting salt from the sea, defying the British-imposed salt tax. This act sparked widespread civil disobedience across India (Rather, 2022) [24]. Quit India Movement (1942) was also regarded as important Gandhi launched this movement demanding an end to British rule in India. He urged Indians to adopt the slogan 'Quit India' and called for nonviolent protests and disobedience. The movement led to widespread arrests of Indian leaders, yet it greatly contributed to India's eventual independence in 1947 (Greenough, 1983) [14].

The Satyagraha discourse, despite its long-standing significance, is under-theorized in social justice and does not significantly contribute to social science literature on equity (Rai & Tiwary, 2012) [23]. Rai and Tiwary contended that comprehending Gandhi is imperative for several reasons: firstly, to revive the indissoluble connection between his philosophy and political action, which operate in conjunction with one another; secondly, to confront and comprehend present-day political upheaval; and thirdly, to challenge the dominance of post-truth politics, as Gandhi's Satyagraha establishes moral and ethical boundaries of truth. Concerning the first point, while scholars generally acknowledge the significance of Satyagraha, there are divergent views regarding the concept of truth, the relationship between history and philosophy, and the distinction between normative principles and the practical aspects of satyagraha. The interpretation of Gandhi's Satyagraha is highly debated and has both restrictive and confining aspects.

### Swadeshi and Swaraj as two pillars of social justice and equity

Gandhi's life exemplified the profound impact of nonviolent resistance and his teachings on self-reliance and self-governance. Social justice and equity continue to serve as fundamental principles that inspire global movements striving for justice, equality, and human dignity. This section delves deep into the principles espoused by Gandhi, exploring their significance in broader spectrum of social justice and equitable governance.

His philosophy of Swadeshi, Swaraj, social justice, and equity wasn't just a political doctrine; it was a moral compass guiding societies towards self-sufficiency, self-governance, equality, and fairness. His teachings remain instrumental in inspiring individuals and movements globally, illustrating the enduring relevance and universal appeal of his principles in shaping a more just and equitable world.

Gandhi popularised the concepts of Swaraj (self-rule) and Swadeshi (self-reliance) in the discussions of colonial India. Although some scholars and advocates embraced this terminology when discussing the Indian independence movement, reaching a consensus on their meaning proved to be challenging (Bhushan & Garfield, 2015) [4]. The Gandhian method aligns with the initial 'basic needs' concept for global development (Emmerij, 1981) [8]. Gandhi's method aims to achieve greater fairness, sometimes known as "distributive justice," by advocating for the use of technology that is suitable for fulfilling 'basic needs' such as food, clothes, shelter, health, and basic education. The social philosophy of Gandhi has been largely overlooked by the majority of development specialists, with only a small number of exceptions (Erikson, 1968) [9].

This analysis aims to elucidate certain facets of Gandhi's history and his ideology on Swadeshi (i.e. the promotion of local self-sufficiency and utilisation of local expertise and capabilities) and Swaraj (i.e. autonomous progress that fosters fairness and righteousness). Gandhi's ideas, rooted in an 'Indic' meta-cultural context, prioritise the principle of equity (Roy, 1985) [26].

#### **Gandhi argued that:**

Swadeshi is that spirit in us which promotes the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. In the domain of politics, I should make use of the indigenous institutions and serve them by curing them of their proved defects. In that of economics, I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting (Gandhi, 1964, p. 269) [11].

Gandhi advocated for a self-help approach to rural development, which he referred to as Swadeshi. During the 1960s, one important component of Swadeshi was interpreted as Appropriate Technology. The word Appropriate Technology has fallen out of favour and is no longer considered trendy. However, it encapsulates a crucial and important understanding of the functioning of both natural and human ecosystems. This paper aims to highlight certain aspects of the ongoing significance of Appropriate Technology and poses topics that would be beneficial to explore both theoretically and empirically. It is desired a shift in development policy decisions, moving away from dependence on a technocratic and traditional growth model approach, and instead embracing an 'Appropriate Technology.'

#### **Constructive Programme and Sarvodaya**

Gandhi formulated an all-encompassing strategy for the

revitalization of India, which he referred to as the constructive project. The objective of this programme was to develop a social structure based on veracity and non-aggression. Constructive Programme and Sarvodaya are interrelated principles linked to Gandhi's philosophy that contribute to social justice and equity in unique manners. Gandhis Constructive Programme emphasised the concept of engaging in peaceful resistance while simultaneously undertaking constructive activity. Its objective was to establish a novel socio-economic structure founded upon moral and ethical ideals. The programme prioritised constructive endeavours such as advancing education, developing self-sufficiency through small-scale industries, enhancing sanitation and cleanliness, promoting communal unity, and pushing for the empowerment of marginalised groups in society.

Both Constructive Programme and Sarvodaya contributed to social justice and fairness by promoting self-sufficiency, empowering communities, addressing the needs of marginalised groups, and pushing for a more inclusive and fair society. The objective of these principles was to bring about a societal transformation by prioritising the dignity and welfare of each person, therefore establishing a fairer and more harmonious social structure.

#### **Gandhi, Caste, and Social Justice**

M. K. Gandhi held nuanced perspectives on the caste system in India and its correlation with social equity. His viewpoint underwent changes as time passed, and although he condemned the discriminatory elements of the caste system, his approach to tackling caste-related problems was fairly nuanced.

Gandhi denounced the societal disparities produced by the caste system, in which specific caste have been marginalised, oppressed, and subjected to discrimination for generations. He championed the elimination of untouchability and the empowerment of the Dalits (previously referred to as 'untouchables'), who endured social exclusion and prejudice (Biswas, 2018) [6].

Gandhi stressed the importance of fostering mutual tolerance and comprehension among many castes and communities. He advocated for the innate egalitarianism of all persons, irrespective of their social hierarchy, and endeavoured to foster a more encompassing community. Nevertheless, Gandhi's methodology for tackling caste-related matters was not exempt from scrutiny. Several modern historians and activists have observed that although he supported the empowerment of marginalised castes, he maintained a conservative stance towards the caste structure itself. He introduced the notion of varnashrama dharma, a theoretical representation of the caste system that emphasised the fulfilment of assigned responsibilities by each caste, without any kind of bias or prejudice (Palakkappillil, 2018) [20]. Critics contend that this position did not effectively question the hierarchical framework of the caste system.

In general, Gandhi's position on caste and social justice involved both supporting the underprivileged and striving to modify, rather than completely eliminate, the caste structure.

He endeavoured to alleviate the more severe elements of discrimination and inequality based on caste, but his approach was criticised for not fully addressing the systemic problems inherent in the caste system.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Gandhi's philosophical journey stands as a testament to the inseparable link between equity and social justice. His commitment to non-violence, economic equality, eradication of social hierarchies and inclusive politics continues to inspire movements striving for a fairer and more just world. As we navigate the complexities of our times, Gandhi's teachings serve as a beacon, urging us to pursue justice and equity for all. Gandhi's concept of social justice was primarily shaped by the Indian tradition rather than Western liberal notions. Indeed, classifying him as either a liberal or a socialist thinker seems challenging. However, his notion of social justice encompasses elements of both positive liberalism and democratic socialism. He, for instance, embraced the perspective that each person should own the resources to attain their independence and cultivate their character. Additionally, he held the belief that access to livelihood should not be controlled exclusively by any particular segment of society. However, Gandhi diverged from the advocates of positive liberalism and democratic socialism by not relying on the state to accomplish these objectives.

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